Fringe Parties in Alberta Politics

Case Study -- the 1985 Spirit River - Fairview Byelection

June, 1985

Doris Bergen

Legislative Intern

In the past few years, Alberta has experienced a proliferation of political parties, groups and movements. Names such as the Alberta Reform Movement, Western Canada Concept, the West-Feds, and the Confederation of Regions have become part of the political consciousness of Albertans. Although these groups are often dismissed as flash in the pan radicals or temporary anomalies, their existence is an important fact of political life in this province. An analysis of these fringe elements can, therefore, provide insights into the functioning of the established political system.

Sociologists have often used the study of deviance as a means of developing an understanding of mainstream society. According to the Sociologist Kai T. Erickson,

> Deviant forms of behaviour, by marking the outer edges of group life, give their inner structure its special character and thus supply the framework within which the people of the group develop an orderly sense of their own cultural identity.[1]

In the same way, political deviance, in the form of fringe parties, can help to define the nature of mainstream political life. In other words, one can gain an understanding of the norm by examining those groups who depart from that norm.

This paper will address several questions related to fringe parties in Alberta. What ideas or beliefs make these elements separate and different from the established political parties? What do these fringe groups have in common, and what does this say about the existing system and the established parties? Can any projections about the future of political life in this province be made from the nature and existence of fringe parties?

Fringe parties in Alberta provide an especially interesting study for several reasons. The phenomenon of fringe parties is marked in this province because so many of them have sprung up here recently, and because their founders and adherents are so outspoken. Fringe parties also tend to generate a great deal of speculation becuase of Alberta's political traditions. Albertans have never re-elected a governing party once it has been defeated at the polls. The Liberals, the United Farmers of Alberta, and the Social Credit Party all held power for long uninterrupted periods, only to be defeated and subsequently disappear into obscurity. In each case, they were replaced by a relatively new political force which emerged rapidly and unexpectedly.

Because of this legacy of the swift ascendancy of new groups, Albertans tend to view the growth of new parties with a great deal of interest. New parties, which elsewhere might be dismissed as passing aberrations, have in Alberta a sobering credibility.

For this paper, I have chosen to focus my study of fringe parties on the 1985 byelection in Spirit River - Fairview. Admittedly, such a narrow focus limits the study, but there are several reasons why that byelection provides an interesting situation in which to examine fringe parties. For one thing, it is easier to study fringe parties in a byelection than in a general election because they tend to be more conspicuous. Byelections provide an excellent way for new parties to gain publicity and exposure without incurring the expense necessary in a general election. Moreover, byelections are traditionally characterized by anti-government votes. Premier Lougheed commented about the Spirit River - Fairview byelection that it "is difficult for a government party with a large majority to do well in byelections."[2] Byelections also generate a spirit of experimentation which benefits fringe parties. It is no coincidence that the only Western Canada Concept

candidate elected to date won that victory in a byelection. It is clearly much easier to try out a new party when the amount of time to be served before facing the electorate is shorter than the regular term.

Spirit River - Fairview specifically is an interesting constituency to use as a case study. It is a predominantly rural constituency, and therefore fertile ground for fringe parties with a rural focus and rural appeal. It was held for thirteen years by Grant Notley, an outspoken member of the opposition, who, it was frequently said, won his victories at the polls not because of, but despite his affiliation with the New Democratic Party. A byelection following the death of such a high-profile politician promised contenders a great deal of publicity, not only in Alberta but in all of Canada.

In view of the importance of the Spirit River - Fairview byelection, it is not surprising that there were a record number of contenders for the seat.[3] Seven political parties fielded candidates, and of these seven, three were represented by their party leaders. Verna Block, the mayor of Spirit River, was the Progressive Conservative candidate. The New Democratic Party ran Jim Gurnett, principal of Rycroft School. A Fairview

businessman, Rick Nicholson, ran for the Liberals, while the Social Credit Party was represented by its interim leader, Ray Neilson of Calgary. Both the Heritage Party and the Confederation of Regions ran their leaders as well: respectively Mike Pawlus, a semi-retired Edmonton engineer, and Elmer Knutson, also an Edmontonian. The only candidate to have run in a previous election in that constituency was Dan Fletcher, the Cleardale farmer who represented the Western Canada Concept Party.

For the purposes of this paper, I have considered four of the seven parties in the byelection to be fringe parties: WCC, COR, Social Credit, and the Heritage Party. The Progressive Conservative Party is hardly fringe in a province where it holds 75 of 79 seats. The New Democratic Party has a fairly substantial and loyal following, and, as Official Opposition and a party with significant national connections, does not fall into the fringe category. After much deliberation, I have also decided that the Liberal Party cannot be classified as fringe. Certainly its performance in recent elections seems to warrant this label, but it did at one time hold power in Alberta, and it is an established national party.

By the same token, one might argue that Social Credit is not a fringe group. However, with the secession of

its two sitting MLAs, who became Independents, the Social Credit Party lost a great deal of its credibility in this province. It has had to reorganize and restructure, and although the name has not changed, the Party has regressed to "new party" status, similar to that of COR, WCC, and the Heritage Party. For this reason, I have categorized Social Credit as a fringe party.

An analysis of the platforms of the four fringe parties, WCC, COR, Social Credit and Heritage, highlights some significant similarities. All four were described as right of centre on the political spectrum. All four argued that Alberta needs a "free-enterprise opposition." The WCC candidate, Fletcher, called for an easing of the tax burden, and urged governments to leave production and marketing to farmers and businessmen. He described the Progressive Conservative government as "interventionist" economically and "intrusive" in its social policy.[4] Elmer Knutson, COR's contender, called for a raw material production economy,[5] and warned constituency residents that they were "losing the freedoms and rights ... [their] forefathers came here to establish."[6]

The Social Credit campaign relied heavily on references to the past and to progress made under Socred governments. Ray Neilson described his party

as "one of the very few parties that has always cared about the people and has allowed them the freedom to prosper in business, without over-regulating them."[7] Even the Heritage Party, whose platform remained rather vague throughout the campaign, described itself as solidly free-enterprise. Mike Pawlus warned against the dangers of communism and socialism,[8] and urged a "return to the free enterprise system" in order to "get Alberta back on its feet again."[9]

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this preoccupation with the need for a right-wing, free-enterprise opposition. First of all, it indicates that the Progressive Conservative Party is viewed as a party of the middle. In spite of the PC's own espousal of free enterprise and privatization, that party was described by all the fringe groups as having somehow betrayed those values. According to the four fringe party candidates, the present government had failed to defend and promote economic freedom and social and political conservatism. By their more radical positions, all four fringe parties helped to define the PC party and its adherents as solidly middle of the road.

The right-wing orientation of the four fringe groups also highlights both successes and failures on the part

of the New Democratic Party. The fact that no new parties attempted to attack the PCs from the left demonstrated that the NDP had successfully achieved a monopoly on the position of left-wing alternative to the present government. Rather than forming new splinter groups, left-wing opposition has tended to gather under the NDP umbrella. However, the proliferation of parties on the right also indicates that the NDP has failed to capture the imagination and support of notable segments of the opposition forces. Viewed from this perspective, the NDP's claim to be the only credible opposition to the PCs[10] appears hollow and unfounded.

To varying degrees, all four fringe parties called for political reform. The COR candidate, Knutson, was the most ambitious in this regard. He advocated broad sturctural changes, not only in Alberta, but in Canada as a whole. He proposed dividing Canada into four regions, rather than ten provinces, and argued that no region should have to accept federal legislation that it did not agree with.[11] Knutson argued that change to the system could and should start at the provincial level, in an agricultural riding, such as Spirit River - Fairview.[12]

The WCC also had specific suggestions for political reform. Fletcher called the Lougheed government "too large and too isolated,"[13] and advocated regularly scheduled elections to keep government accountable.[14] He also called for referenda on major public issues, the right to initiate legislation, a free vote in the Legislature, and recall for elected officials.[15] In Fletcher's words, "Government by the people and for the people is what the WCC can offer."[16]

The Social Credit and Heritage parties were less specific about reform, but both alluded to the need for it. Neilson urged a return to the "Christian principles of Aberhart and the Social Credit,"[17] and advocated "going back to the people."[18] Pawlus, for his part, claimed his party wanted to "put democracy back to work."[19]

The fringe parties' lobbying for political reform has some important implications. First of all, it indicates that there is discontent, not only with the present political situation in this province, but with the system as a whole. This sort of dissatisfaction and eagerness for change is part of Alberta's political tradition. For example, both the UFA and Social Credit governments were experiments in new political approaches, not merely in the formation of new parties.

The existence and nature of the fringe parties reflects a degree of cynicism towards existing political structures, and especially towards a party style of politics. Interestingly, the party names chosen by both WCC and COR reflect an animosity to party politics. WCC uses the word "concept" to emphasize that it is more than a party, it is an entire political system. The name Confederation of Regions implies a complete restructuring of the entire nation. Clearly that transcends the mandate of a party in the usual sense of the word. Such skepticism towards "partyism" dates back to the early history of the province. William Irvine, for example, defined "partyism" in 1920 as anonymous with "greed, servility, disregard for truth, graft, patronage and corruption."[20]

All four of the fringe parties, but especially WCC and COR, placed a great deal of emphasis on their western and Albertan roots. Certainly both the WCC and COR candidates made it clear that they were not campaigning for separatism.[21] Still, the WCC is quite clearly labelled the "Western Canada" Concept, and Knutson championed COR as the "only purely western party with western loyalties and western policies."[22] As for Social Credit, it was touted throughout the campaign as offering the style of government best suited to

Alberta. The Heritage Party, by the name it chose, reminded Albertans of that very Albertan institution, the Heritage Savings Trust Fund.

This preoccupation with sectional politics has some important implications. It seems to demonstrate that there are still strong feelings of western alienation in this province. However, the concerted attempts of both WCC and COR to downplay their separatist images indicates that alienation does not mean there is staunch support for secession from Confederation.

The regional orientation of the fringe parties also reflects the organization of the electoral system. Because we do not have a system of proportional representation, minor parties must develop a sectional stronghold in order to survive. This means that minor parties will invariably strive for a well-defined regional approach.

At a very basic level, this argument also helps explain the strong showing of the WCC in the Spirit River - Fairview byelection. Dan Fletcher coupled his demands for broad political reform in Alberta and Canada with a detailed platform based on local concerns. He repeatedly addressed agricultural issues important to farmers in Northern Alberta, such as freight rates, fuel and fertilizer costs, and the Canadian Wheat Board.

The COR candidate spent much less time building regional support, and that neglect was reflected in his poor showing at the polls.

In spite of their ardent right-wing rhetoric, three of the four fringe parties made some concessions to the quasi-welfare state mentality. The WCC statement of principles includes a commitment to "community support for the deserving needy,"[24] and the Social Credit slogan was "social justice without socialism."[25] Pawlus of the Heritage Party promised to "protect the disadvantaged,"[26] and to give unemployed Albertans support payments from the Heritage Fund.[27] Only Knutson, the COR candidate, did not address this issue.

The stance of the WCC, Social Credit and the Heritage Party on the issue of government responsibility for social welfare conveys some important information about attitudes in Alberta. After years of government involvement in social issues, it is very difficult to advocate a purely free-enterprise system. Although the fringe parties attempted to differentiate themselves from the governing PCs by decrying government intrusion into private affairs, they did not consider it politically wise to completely deny governmental involvement in these areas.

A look at the outcome of the Spirit River - Fairview byelection also sheds some light on politics in this province. The byelection ended in an NDP victory. The PC candidate, Verna Block, came in a fairly close second, and Dan Fletcher of the WCC was not far behind her. The other four contenders finished well behind.

The NDP win was not a big surprise. After all, the seat had been held for thirteen years by a New Democrat, and for eleven of those years, it had been the only NDP constituency in the province. More surprising than Gurnett's victory was the strong showing of the WCC candidate.

Fletcher's explanation of his success provides an interesting interpretation of the situation:

> The PCs have been strong in this constituency for a number of years and they've always put up a good show against even Grant Notley... We've been called the "conservative party in a hurry", and maybe the people are perceiving that their Conservative party is not doing as much as they'd like, as quickly as they'd like.[28]

In other words, Fletcher attributed his success to the fact that he was more progressively conservative than the Progressive Conservatives. He achieved a large number of votes, not because of his WCC platform, but because he stood for many of the same things as the government while having the attraction of an opposition candidate.

PC organizers certainly blamed their loss on the WCC votes. Block's campaign manager put it like this: "There's lots of right wing people here, they're just

not all in the same party."[29]

In a way, Fletcher's success can be viewed as a failure for his party. Fringe parties are created to be different from the established parties. However, Fletcher's support, it can be argued, was precisely the result of his efforts to de-emphasize his fringe party status, and convey the impression of similarity to the PCs.

This quandary is typical of the contradictions and tensions inherent in the political system. In many ways, the factors which give rise to a large number of fringe parties are the same factors which guarantee their failure. For example, the large majority enjoyed by the present government is clearly a result of the ability of the PCs to appeal to a broad spectrum of voters. However, that ability necessitates a certain flexibility or vagueness in party doctrines and campaign platforms. That vagueness and versatility opens the door to fringe parties who challenge the boundaries of the government party. Because the NDP maintains the left boundary position, the new parties tend to be right-wing in orientation.

However, that versatility of the Progressive Conservatives also provides the ultimate reason for their security vis-à-vis the fringe parties. Throughout their years in power, the Progressive Conservatives have maintained an extremely successful balancing act.

They have made it very difficult for any party to attack them on the right by constantly paying public homage to private enterprise and private initiative. In order to differentiate themselves markedly from the PCs, right-wing groups have been forced into positions of radicalism which eventually destroy their credibility and erode their base of support.

The WCC experienced this dilemma rather painfully with the defeat of Gordon Kessler in the general election of 1982. To avoid being forced into an untenably radical position, they had to de-emphasize their own raison d'être. The new more moderate image which resulted was much closer to that of the PCs.

At the same time as opposition from the right has been rendered impotent by the PCs' own right-wing rhetoric, opposition from the left has also been kept weak, by concessions to centre and left-wing causes. One cannot help but notice that, despite lip service to privatization and conservatism, this government has instituted many social programs and job creation programs, similar to those advocated by the NDP. This has left the NDP in an awkward position. That party has a choice of either moving further left, and jeopardizing its own moderate support, or becoming less clearly different from the PC government.

It would be naive to point to the NDP victory in Spirit River - Fairview as evidence of a massive swing towards

that party. After all, Spirit River - Fairview has never been represented by a Progressive Conservative. Moreover, Gurnett won by a slim margin of 470 votes.

If the NDP cannot be expected to make tremendous gains in the next election, can we expect a surge of opposition on the right? I would argue no. The proliferation of fringe parties does indicate discontent and dissatisfaction, but the failure of those parties demonstrates even more clearly that the volume of that discontent is small. Moreover, it can be argued that the existence of numerous fringe parties serves to strengthen the position of the government, not to weaken it. It is not simply the factor of divide and rule, although that does enter into it. Fringe parties, like the deviants studied by sociologists, have an important function. They help define the boundaries of mainstream political life, and contribute to solidarity among adherents of the government party. As long as they remain as weak as they presently are, fringe parties will contribute to the stability of the governing majority, rather than threatening that position.

Notes

1. Kai T. Erickson, Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966), 13.

2. See Darrell Skidnuk, "Byelection on February 21," Grande Prairie Daily Herald Tribune, 23 Jan. 1985, and Ken Nelson, "Lougheed, Martin see Silver Lining in Results," DHT, 22 Feb. 1985, 1.

3. Rick Pedersen, "Northern Byelection Breaks Record," Edmonton Journal, 7 Feb. 1985.

4. Anita Elash and Stephen Weatherbe, "Holding the Opposition Fort," Alberta Report, 4 March 1985, 9. See also Link Byfield, "Worlds Apart," AR, 4 March 1985, 11.

5. See "Searching for the Best Candidate," Peace River Record - Gazette, 13 Feb. 1985, 5.

6. "'Last Chance' Forum", Fairview Post, 20 Feb. 1985, 1.

7. "Six Appear at Whitelaw Forum," FP, 13 Feb. 1985, 2.

8. Bill Sass and Rick Pedersen, "Door-knocking over, Voters Go to Polls Today," EJ, 21 Feb. 1985, A12.

9. "Talking Politics at Worsley Forum," FP, 30 Jan. 1985, 2.

10. For an example of this type of claim, see the NDP advertisement, FP, 20 Feb. 1985, 2.

11. Elash and Weatherbe, "Going Head to Head in Fairview," AR, 21 Jan. 1985, 7; and Peter Stockland, "A Spirited Election," Edmonton Sun, 17 Feb. 1985, 30.

12. RG, 16 Jan. 1985, 11.

13. Stockland, ES, 17 Feb. 1985, 30.

14. RG, 16 Jan. 1985, 11.

15. See Dave Truscott, "Candidates give their Last Hurrah," DHT, 19 Feb. 1985; "Talking Politics at Worsley Forum," FP, 30 Jan. 1985, 2; Elash and Weatherbe, AR 4 March 1985, 7; and FP 30 Jan. 1985,3.

16. "Candidates get Exposure in Berwyn," FP 16 Jan. 1985,3.

17. David Olinger, "Social Credit to Take Run at S.R. - Fairview," DHT, 22 Jan. 1985.

18. "Socreds appoint outside candidate," FP, 30 Jan. 1985,1.

19. Rick Pedersen, "Northern Byelection Breaks Record," EJ, 7 Feb. 1985.

20. William Irvine, The Farmers in Politics, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1920), 72. See also C.B. Macpherson, Democracy in Alberta: The Theory and Practice of a Quasi-Party System, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953), 24-27.

21. See for example, Stockland, ES, 17 Feb. 1985, 30; and FP 13 Feb. 1985, 12.

22. "'Last Chance' Forum," FP, 20 Feb. 1985, 1.

23. This argument is very well developed by Alan C. Cairns, "The Electoral System and the Party System in Canada, 1921-1965," in Politics: Canada, edited by Paul W. Fox, fourth edition, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1977), 228-246.

24. "Our Statement of Principles," brochure printed by Alberta WCC.

25. Link Byfield, "Alberta Report Poll," AR, 18 Feb. 1985,7.

26. FP, 20 Feb. 1985, 2.

27. Elash, "Splinter # 10," AR, 4 Feb. 1985, 8.

28. Rick Charlton, "Gurnett wins it for the NDP," DHT, 22 Feb. 1985, 1.

29. Pedersen and Sass, "NDP Rolls Over Tories, WCC," EJ, 22 Feb. 1985, 1.

Bibiography

Alberta Report.

Western Perspectives I (Formerly Prairie Perspectives) Papers of the Western Canadian Studies Conference, 1973. Edited with an Introduction by David Jay Bercuson. (Toronto, Holt, Rinehart & Winston of Canada Ltd., 1974).

Edmonton Journal.

Edmonton Sun.

Erickson, Kai T. Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1966).

Fairview Post.

Fox, Paul W. Politics: Canada. Fourth edition. (Toronto: McGraw - Hill Ryerson Ltd., 1977).

Grande Prairie Daily Herald Tribune.

Irvine, William. The Farmers in Politics. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 1920).

Kerr, Donald C. Editor. Western Canadian Politics: The Radical Tradition. First Edition. (Edmonton: Newest Institute for Western Canadian Studies Inc., 1981).

MacGregor Dawson, R. and W.F. Dawson. Democratic Government in Canada. Revised by Norman Ward. Fourth Edition. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

Macpherson, C.B. Democracy in Alberta: The Theory and Practice of a Quasi-Party System. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1953).

Palmer, Howard. The New Provinces: Alberta and Saskatchewan, 1905 - 1980. Twelfth Western Canada Studies Conference. (Vancouver: Tantalus Research Ltd., 1980).

Peace River Record-Gazette.

Thomas, Lewis H. Editor. Essays on Western History in Honour of Lewis Gwynne Thomas. (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1976).